

FROM BYZANTIUM TO IRAN
Armenian Studies in Honour of
Nina G. Garsoïan

edited by
Jean-Pierre Mahé
Robert W. Thomson

Scholars Press
Atlanta, Georgia

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

From Byzantium to Iran : Armenian studies in honour of Nina G.

Garsoïan / edited by Jean-Pierre Mahé, Robert W. Thomson.

p. cm. — (Occasional papers and proceedings / Scholars Press ;
no. 8) (Suren D. Fesjian academic publications ; no. 5)
English and French.

ISBN 0-7885-0152-6 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Armenians—History. 2. Armenia—History. 3. Armenian
philology. 4. Art, Armenan. I. Garsoïan, Nina G., 1923–

II. Mahé, Jean-Pierre. III. Thomson, Robert W., 1934–

IV. Series: Occasional papers and proceedings (Scholars Press) ; no.

8. V. Series: Suren D. Fesjian academic publications ; no. 5.

DS176.F75 1997

956.6'2—dc21

96-52162

CIP

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper



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The Princely Nobility of Georgia¹

Georgia is in Caucasia (or Transcaucasia), the north-easternmost region of the Mediterranean world, which is bordered in the north by the Caucasus, washed in the west and east by the Black and the Caspian Sea, opens out in a semi-circle towards the south, and adjoins Anatolia, Syria, Mesopotamia and Iran. It has in historical times been occupied by the Georgians and their southern neighbours the Armenians, as well as by the Caspian Albanians, early on submerged by Islam.

Caucasian civilisation is essentially a unity, whatever the differences between its component parts. Exactly like its sister civilisations, Western and Byzantine, it derives from a vaster earlier unity—Christian pan-Mediterranean civilisation, itself in turn an amalgam of local Mediterranean cultures. Along with the rest of the East Mediterranean world, Caucasia passed through three successive phases of amalgamation: it was associated with the Iranian empire of the Achaemenids and their successors, with the Hellenistic world born of Alexander's conquests, and with the pan-Mediterranean *pax romana*. Finally, together with the Romano-Hellenistic world, it entered, in the first half of the fourth century, the unity of Christendom.

Georgian history begins possibly as early as in the second millennium B.C. with the Kingdom of Colchis in Western Georgia, celebrated in the myth of the Argonauts; later, East Georgia also became a kingdom, that of Iberia; and for a great part of its history Georgia was divided into these two realms.

¹ A translation, somewhat altered, of the Introduction to *Les Maisons princières géorgiennes de l'Empire de Russie*, Rome 1983, p. 7–17.

It is largely owing to Caucasia's position of a perennial apple of discord between the neighbouring imperial powers—Rome and Iran, Byzantium and the Caliphate—each preferring to see it autonomous rather than absorbed by the rival, their preponderance only manifesting itself in alternating suzerainty, that its uninterrupted social, cultural, and political development, from prehistoric to modern times, involving the extraordinary antiquity of its historical families, is due.²

There is something frivolous, not to say ridiculous, in the tendency, often in evidence, to apply sub-cultural criteria, such as those of race, geography, climate, to civilised societies, which can properly be classified in accordance with the higher criteria of religion, social and political structure, culture. Now Caucasia, and of course Georgia, is, to repeat, a part of the Christian pan-Mediterranean world³, its social structure a symbiosis of analogues of Celtic "dynasticism" and Romano-Germanic feudalism,⁴ its political system an analogue of the mediaeval monarchies of the West, its architecture an analogue of Romanesque containing seeds of Gothic,⁵ its literature similar to that of the Christian West. It matters little in what terms geographers may choose to describe it:—a part of Europe or a part of Asia; it has in any case, as Transcaucasia, formed part of the *European* territories of the Russian Empire. At all events, Christian Caucasia is totally distinct and different from the neighbouring egalitarian and absolutist world of Islam, which one associates with Asia and against which it has always been a bastion of Christendom. And if one must descend to speaking in terms of race, it will be remembered that the Caucasians have always been regarded as such pure representatives of the white race that that race itself has come to be called Caucasian.⁶

The two Georgian realms were united at the beginning of the eleventh century when the Bagratid Dynasty, reigning in Iberia from the ninth inherited the Kingdom of Abasgia, founded in the eighth by the Antchabad Dynasty as a continuation of Classical Colchis and subsequent Lazica. This was the beginning of the Georgian Golden Age,

² Toumanoff, 1963: Introduction, 11–15, I. The Social Background of Christian Caucasia, 33–144, II. States and Dynasties of Caucasia in the Formative Centuries, 147–259; Toumanoff, 1966: 593–637.

³ Cf. Toumanoff, 1963: 12–14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 34–40, 50–52, 77–83, 90–93, 108–109, 112–114.

⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, 13 n. 2.

⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, 66 n. 62.

from the eleventh to the thirteenth century, when United Georgia reached the summit of might and civilisation, controlling entire Caucasia and exercising suzerainty over the neighbouring Empire of Trebizond and Muslim Kingdom of Shirvan (part of Classical Albania), as well as participating in the Crusades.

Then the Mongol and Turcoman invasions in the thirteenth century and Tamerlane's attacks in the fourteenth put an end to the Golden Age. And at the end of the following century, the Bagratids, who had united Georgia and founded its might, weakened it by dividing it into three realms, each under a branch of the dynasty: the Kingdom of Georgia proper (Iberia), that of Imeretia (Abasgia), and that of Kakhetia (eastern Iberia). There emerged, moreover, five independent principalities.

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries brought about a rebirth both cultural and political—Georgia's silver Age. The Kings of Kakhetia succeeded in uniting their Crown with that of Georgia proper and sought to re-establish the pan-Caucasian State of the Golden Age. But they were faced with the growing pressure from the Muslim neighbours which threatened the very existence of this Christian bastion. It was necessary to seek the aid of Christian powers. Having sought it in vain in the West, King Heraclius II of Georgia turned to the powerful northern neighbour—Russia. Thus was concluded on 24 July 1783 a treaty between the King and the Empress Catherine II of Russia. In exchange for imperial protection and guarantee of autonomy, Georgia accepted the suzerainty of the Russian Empire. the nobiliary implications of this treaty will be examined later.

However, when Iran retaliated invading Georgia and sacking Tiflis in 1795, no sufficient Russian aid was given. Finally, another treaty was proposed, between King George XII, Heraclius II's successor, and the successor of Catherine II, the Emperor Paul I, which was to make Georgia more closely bound to Russia. The death of the King of Georgia on 28 December 1800/9 January 1801 prevented this proposed treaty from being ratified. The struggle round the throne that followed George XII's death offering an occasion, the Kingdom of Georgia was simply annexed by the Russian Empire in 1801, in violation of the guarantees of the treaty of 1783. In 1810, the Kingdom of Imeretia was in its turn annexed and so were subsequently the independent principalities. Entire Georgia became thus an integral part of the Empire and, as will be seen, the Georgian nobility was incorporated in the nobility of the Empire.

The nobility of Georgia—and that of Caucasia in general—was always divided into two unequal strata: a minority of the princely and ducal houses and a majority of non-titled nobles, or gentry, who were vassals of the Princes and the Dukes, of the Primate, or Katholikos, who had his own state, or immediately of the King. No other nobiliary titles than those of Prince and Duke existed; and it is in examining these two dignities that the genesis and structure of the high nobility of Georgia can be comprehended.

The title of Prince translates the Georgian congeneric terms *Tavad* and *Mtvar*, designating princely family heads, which correspond exactly to *Fürst* in German. It also translates the titles *Tavadishvili*, *Batonishvili* and *Eristvishvili* designating princely, royal and ducal cadets and corresponding to *Prinz* in German.⁷

The fact of the existence at the summit of the body of the nobility of a group, or rather a caste, of dynastic princes, distinct from the rest of the nobles is a characteristic feature of the social structure of Georgia, and indeed of Caucasia. These princely houses represent the survival of tribal dynasties, which in earlier times were regarded as divine or at least theophanic, sprung from the gods and possessed of "divine blood". these princes were more ancient than kingship, which arose in their midst when one of them—a super-dynast as it were—had succeeded in imposing his hegemony upon his peers.⁸

Whatever may be the ascertained dates of the appearance in history of this or that dynastic house, the princely nobility of Georgia, as a social body, is immemorial. It would not be easy to find another part of Christendom where princely families were known historically to have existed from most remote times and to have never been other than princely; where through matrimonial alliances these families could trace themselves to still more ancient dynasties; where, in other words, there existed traceable links with Antiquity.⁹

⁷ *Ibid.*, 92 n. 132.

⁸ The term nobility is used here in its—chiefly—Continental sense of nobility-and-gentry, titled and untitled *noblesse*. "In strictness nobility and gentry are the same thing. The fact is overshadowed in England . . . by the prevalent confusion between nobility and peerage": Freeman, 724.

⁹ Bussell, 339: speaking of the Armenians, which applies as well to the Georgians, that they "might boast to find among themselves the 'oldest and most illustrious families in Christendom'."

The dynastic Princes in Caucasia were vested with executive, legislative, judicial and fiscal authority, commanded their own armed forces, and considered themselves competent to negotiate with foreign powers. They were, accordingly, sovereign and received, in the case of those who happened to be immediate vassals of the Roman Emperor, the treatment due to minor kings.¹⁰ Their sovereign status, however, was actually one of co-sovereignty with the royal Crown; but in seceding from its overlordship they became independent sovereign rulers. Consequently, the Caucasian kingdoms were merely federations of reigning Princes presided by Kings, who could not pretend, with regard to them, to be more than *primi inter pares*.

Of the two above-mentioned Georgian congeneric terms, *Mtavar* tended, by the end of the Middle Ages, to designate the independent Princes, while *Tavad* was the title of the Princes who remained co-sovereign with the royal Crown. The cadets of the former, as also the royal cadets, were styled *Batonishvili*, and those of the latter *Tavadishvili*.

The title of Duke renders the Georgian term *Eristav*. The royal Crown, having sprung from the princely *milieu*, endeavoured to augment its hegemony among the Princes. What it was powerless to reduce by force it attempted to control through sanction: obliged to accept the pre-existent dynastic rights of the Princes, it affected to regard these as emanating, feudally, from itself. It was thus that to the purely political dependence of the sovereign Princes upon a more powerful sovereign, the King, there were superadded features indicative of a feudal dependence; and thus there came into being, next to the aboriginal régime, which may be called Dynasticism, a novel régime, introduced under foreign influence, one of Feudalism. The symbiosis of these two régimes characterises the social structure of Georgia. Accordingly, next to the immemorial institution of the dynastic Prince, there arose that of the feudal Duke, governor and military commander in the King's service.¹¹

And yet the office of Duke was conferred—at first most often, later always—upon Princes. It might happen that a feudal duchy contained the allods of the Princes established on its territory including that of the

¹⁰ Toumanoff, 1963: 133–135.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 91, 96–99, 102–103; cf. 115–116.

Duke himself. Princes likewise were enfeoffed with the high offices of the Crown. And so the original designs of kingship were frustrated.¹²

Whatever the personal identity of the great feudatories, Dukes and holders of the high offices, with the Princes, the difference between the two systems, Dynasticism and Feudalism, remained real. Side by side with the relative simplicity of princely allods and noble allods, Feudalism, in which the entire body of the nobility, as well as the Church, participated, acquired all the complexity that can be observed in Western Europe: fiefs and *arriere fiefs*, *dominium directum* and *dominium utile*, *fiefs-seigneuries* and office-fiefs; vassalage, investiture, homage; feudal service and immunity; and later even the term "feudalism" (*patronqmoba*, a fusion of two words denoting "suzerain" and "vassal" respectively); finally, as a counterpoise to the personal identity just mentioned, the term *Didebul*, or "grandee", was used for denoting great feudatories as such, irrespective of belonging to the dynastic caste, and thus served to express the Crown's point of view.¹³

The name of a co-sovereign principality, *Satavado*, as a legal unit (not necessarily a geographical one, since allods might be territorially dispersed), was formed with the name of the family placed between the prefix *sa-* and the suffix *-o*. The name of a duchy, *Saeristavo*, as well as that of an independent principality, evolved from a duchy, *Samtavro*, was always geographical. The difference in the formation of these names symbolises that between Dynasticism and Feudalism: the difference between the idea of what one is by blood and what one has as fief.

At the end of the Middle Ages, Georgian society passed through a crisis. In the course of the fifteenth century—as has been noted above—the united Kingdom of Georgia became divided into three; and, simultaneously, five ducal houses, all of them of dynastic origin, seceded from royal suzerainty and converted their ducal fiefs into independent principalities, in which they began to exercise, grand-duccally as it were, their own suzerainty over the princely houses situated on the territory of their States.¹⁴

¹² *Ibid.*, 141–142.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 267.

¹⁴ The five houses in question were those of: Dadiani in Mingrelia (followed in the seventeenth century by the noble family of Tchikovani), Dadian-Gurieli in Guria, Djaqeli in Meschia, Gelovani in Suania, or Svanetia (followed in the eighteenth century by the princely house of Dadeshkeliani), and Sharvashidze in Abkhasia. Meschia was annexed by the Ottoman Empire in the eighteenth century, the rest by

The division of the country entailed that of many princely houses, whose different branches found themselves situated in different States. the division of a family meant the partition of its principality and thus of the allod or allods which formed part of it. Now the Georgian nobility had from most ancient times kept the practice of communal property. A dynastic house possessed indivisibly the allod, formerly the territory of the tribe or clan ruled in prehistoric times by the ancestors of that house, which the heads of that house now administered for the entire family. The dignity of a house hinged—in the Kingdom of Georgia (Iberia) at least—in some way on the integral possession of its princely domain. Accordingly, if dynastic origin conceded to a house its place in the princely caste, that place was affected by a partition of its principality and its allods; and the undivided houses outranked the divided ones. Here, however, Feudalism proved of service to Dynasticism. A fief, whether land of office, was, together with allods, incorporated into a principality. Thus the principality which included an office-fief of the Crown escaped partition, because offices, being generally indivisible by nature, rendered likewise indivisible the patrimonial domains with which they were conjoined.¹⁵

The vague pre-eminence of the Undivided houses received in the legal code of King Vakhtang VI of Georgia (1711–1723) an exaggerated precision. Moved by *l'esprit de système*, the learned royal legislator introduced, in imitation of the triple division of the untitled Nobles—vassals of the King, vassals of the Church, vassals of the Princes—, a novel, likewise triple, division among the co-sovereign Princes. According to this strange innovation, the "First Class", to which was applied the mediaeval term *Didebul* combined with the title of Prince, was composed of the heads of the Undivided houses; the "Second" was reserved for their cadets; whereas the Divided houses were all consigned to the "Third". This arrangement proved as ephemeral as it was artificial. It came to an end soon after its inception. In the List of the Princes attached to the Treaty of 1783, which is dealt with below, the Princes are ranged without any trace of the triple division (though indeed the Undivided precede, but without any distinction, the Divided).¹⁶

the Russian Empire in the nineteenth.

¹⁵ Toumanoff, 1963: 267.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 267–268. For the Undivided houses cf. Toumanoff, 1983: 13. Though artificial in the case of Georgia, a division into three grades of the highest nobiliary rank is in

In spite of the régime of Dynasticism, some non-dynastic families succeeded, in the course of centuries, in penetrating into the closed circle of the dynasts. There seem to have been, at the beginning, some non-princely dukes; and, among the Princes, there has been a house, for instance, descended indeed from an Emperor of the East, whose family however was not of dynastic origin, and another house reigning in an independent principality, which through marriage rose from the *milieu* of untitled nobles to the political position and even the rank of the preceding dynasty; there were also a few other non-dynastic families which were at the end of the Georgian Monarchy received among the Princes of the realm or merely recognised as bearers of foreign dignities.¹⁷

With the absorption of the Georgian States by the Russian Empire, their ex-royal, princely and ducal houses were received among the princely houses of the Empire, on the basis of Article IX of the Treaty of 1783, which established the parity of the Georgian Princes and the Princes of the Empire, as well as between the Georgian untitled Nobles and those of the Empire. The above List of the Princes (and the Nobles) was attached to that Treaty. Actually, even before 1783, branches of Georgian princely houses settled in Russia had, as a matter of course, all held the position of Russian Princes.¹⁸

It may not be devoid of interest to observe that the parity of the two princely sets was stipulated at the time when the Russian Empire had reached the height of power and prestige, when, for instance, the Russians who had received the dignity of Princes of the Holy Roman Empire were merely allowed to accept their foreign titles, while only one of them was subsequently raised—promoted, rather—to the dignity of a Russian Prince.¹⁹

itself nothing novel in history. Suffice it to recall the three classes of the *Grande*s of Spain, for instance. Muscovy offers an extreme example of this. The Russian Princes of the Czardom underwent in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a truly amazing division into three layers: there were the so-called “elder brethren” who preceded all other families; then those of the middle layer who were preceded by certain *non-princely* noble families; finally the “younger brethren” who were ranged below other *non-princely* families.

¹⁷ Cf. Toumanoff, 1983, 60; for a list of all the princely houses, *passim*. Some late historians, expressing the Crown’s bias, have attempted to interpret as creations, mere enfeoffment with offices of some old dynastic houses, *ibid.*, 15.

¹⁸ There were at least twelve.

¹⁹ Menshikoff was created a Prince of the Holy Roman Empire in 1705 and Russian

Although the Treaty of 1783 concerned only one—the most important—of the Georgian States, the Kingdom of Georgia (Iberia and Kakhetia), the provisions of its Article IX were applied by the Russians to the nobilities of the other States: the Kingdom of Imeretia and the independent principalities, following their annexation by the Empire.

The reception into the nobility of the Empire, after the annexations, necessitated documentary proofs, which were rigorously examined by the Heraldic Department of the Ruling Senate. In the case of the Georgian Princes whose position was the uncreated mark of dynastic origin, which antedated all—super-dynastic—kingship, the question was evidently one of producing not any diplomas of creation, but official, indeed royal, documents testifying—*post factum*—to that position, like, precisely, the List of the Princes of 1783.

The reception was effected by way of a “recognition” or a “confirmation” (quasi-synonymous terms), by Imperial edicts or the Ruling Senate’s resolutions, of the princely dignity of the Russian Empire for all the members of a family. Subsequently, the Senate confirmed this dignity for new generations; this was the procedure followed in the case of all titled families of the Empire.²⁰

For the Georgian Princes and the descendants of Kings, the change brought about by the annexations had the considerable drawback of *mediatisation*, for, having previously been royal or independent or co-sovereign, they found themselves transformed into subjects—as were all the other Princes of the Empire—of the imperial Crown.

Cyril Toumanoff

Prince in 1707; three others—all Catherine II’s favourites—received only the Roman dignity.

²⁰ The titles are mentioned as of the Russian Empire or without any specification. There were cases of admission of foreign titles *as such*, and not as those of the Empire: in these cases titles are given with the indication of their provenance (as, e.g., “Tatar Princes”, “Counts of the Holy Roman Empire”, “Swedish Barons”). The reception of the Georgian Princes and Nobles usually entailed a Russification of their family names.

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